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ABSTRACT

Testing English listening skills involves a variety of skills. Sounds are sometimes difficult to discriminate in a language that is not one's native tongue, so testing phoneme discrimination, the ability to tell the difference between sounds, is important. Picture choice items are a good way to select among alternatives to demonstrate discrimination of the phonemes. Discriminating stress and intonation can be tested by having test takers listen to a sentence that they have in front of them and indicate the main stress of the sentence. This can be useful, but will not demonstrate student understanding of meaning. Ability to understand the meaning of difference in intonation can be tested by asking for interpretations of a sentence, but this also can lack context information. Teachers can test student understanding of individual sentences and dialogues or they can ask test takers to choose among responses to an utterance. Some types of listening tasks make use of visual materials in true-false or matching situations. Map and drawing tasks can also be used to assess listening ability, and tasks involving talks and lectures are particularly appropriate for students who will be using English in schools where it is the language of instruction. Testing listening is difficult, and teachers must be aware that listening tests frequently do not reflect real-world listening tasks. (SLD)

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ED 398 257

Testing Listening

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Testing listening involves a variety of skills. At the lowest level, it involves discrimination among sounds, discrimination among intonation and stress patterns, and comprehension of short and long listening texts. While the first two are part of listening, they are, of course, not sufficient.

Testing Phoneme Discrimination

Sounds are sometimes difficult to discriminate in a language other than one's native language, especially if the sounds are not distinguished in the native language. There are several ways to test phoneme discrimination, that is, ability to tell the difference between different sounds. One way to test phoneme discrimination is to have the testees look at a picture and listen to four words and decide which word is the object in the picture. The words chosen as alternatives should be close to the correct word. However, it is often difficult to find common enough words with similar sounds, and if unfamiliar words are used, they will not make good alternatives. Alternatively, the testees could be presented with four pictures and be asked to choose the picture that matches the word that they hear. Another possibility is to give testees three words and ask them to indicate which two are the same. Finally, testees can listen to a spoken sentence and be asked to identify which one of four similar words were used in the sentence.

Items with full sentences have the drawback that testees can make use of not just phoneme discrimination but also knowledge of grammar and lexical items. If one of the words that the alternatives does not fit grammatically or semantically in the sentence, then testees who realize that have an advantage.

This type of discrimination item is one that can be used for diagnostic purposes to see whether students have particular problems with distinguishing between phonemes. However, it does not give the teacher any information about the testees' ability to comprehend spoken English.

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Discriminating Stress and Intonation

The ability to recognize stress can be tested by having testees listen to a sentence that they also have in front of them. Testees are instructed to indicate the word that carries the main stress of the sentence. While recognizing stress patterns is useful in English, the problem with this type of test is that it lacks a context. Testees need to show that they can recognize the difference between "*John* is going today" and "John is going *today*," but they do not need to show that they understand that there is a difference in the meanings of the two sentences or what the difference is.

Ability to understand the meaning of difference in intonation can be tested by having the testees listen to a statement and choose from three interpretations of the statement. For example, testees might be given the statement "Vera is a wonderful musician" and be asked to decide whether the speaker is making a straightforward statement, a sarcastic statement, or a question. Since the context is neutral, however, it is sometimes difficult to avoid ambiguity. In real communication, listeners make use of their background knowledge, the context, etc., as well as the intonation to help them interpret the communicative meaning of an utterance.

Understanding Sentences and Dialogues

Interpreting the meaning. A teacher can also test the students' understanding of individual sentences and dialogues. In the simplest form, this type of item consists of a single sentence which testees listen to and four written statements from which they choose the one closest in meaning to the original spoken sentence. For example:

Spoken:
I had hoped to visit you while I was in New York.

Written:
A. I was in New York but did not visit you.
B. I will be in New York and hope to visit you.
C. I visited you in New York and hope to again.
D. I am in New York and would like to visit you.

Another type of item is one in which the testees listen to an utterance and choose from among four responses the most appropriate response. In that case, the testees are not being asked directly what the meaning of the utterance is. Rather they are being asked to show that they know what it

means by showing that they recognize an appropriate response. This tests both the testees' listening ability and their knowledge of appropriate second pair parts of adjacency pairs.

An example of this type of item is as follows.

Spoken:
Would you mind if I visited you next time I came to New York?

Written:
A. Yes, of course. I'd love to visit New York.
B. No, I don't really think that much of New York.
C. Yes, I would. You can come any time.
D. No, not at all. I'd really love to have you.

(At a slightly higher level, both the first statement and the responses can be spoken, but in that case, it might be better to have only three responses, since it would be difficult to keep all four responses in mind.)

In this example, the testees need to know that "Would you mind if I..." is a form used for asking permission, and that a positive response begins with "no (I don't mind)." Because this type of item requires two different types of information, there is a certain amount of controversy about it. Some theorists argue that it is not a good item type, because it requires these two types of knowledge. Testees could possibly understand the utterance perfectly well but not know how to respond to it. Also, since the utterances are presented in isolation and out of context, the situation is not realistic. However, this type of item can be useful if these limitations are kept in mind. It is a more communicative type of task than many listening tasks, so it may have beneficial backwash effects, and it is relatively easy to administer.

Tasks Using Visual Materials

Matching and True/False Tasks

Some types of tasks make use of visual materials along with the spoken material to test listening. The simplest form of this task is to present testees with a picture or other visual (for example, a chart, graph, etc.) along with spoken true/false statements. Testees look at the visual and decide if the statements are true or false. An alternative is to present testees with a series of similar pictures and to have them match the pictures with spoken sentences describing them. Similarly, the testees can

listen to a short dialogue, rather than just a statement, and decide which of the pictures matches the dialogue.

The advantage of using visual materials in this way is that they can be used to test listening alone without involving other skills very much (if the tester considers that an advantage)--though it is impossible to entirely eliminate the use of other skills. However, they do not reflect the sorts of listening done in the real world.

Map Tasks

Another way to use visual materials in testing listening is to use maps. One activity involves having testees listen to directions for how to get somewhere and follow along on the map. They respond by drawing their route or indicating where they would be at the end of the directions. Another possibility is to have testees listen to a conversation referring to various locations on the map and having the testees identify the locations.

Drawing Tasks

Testees can also do drawing tasks according to instructions. For example, they can be given a simple line drawing and be asked to complete it according to certain instructions. For example, the testees can be presented with a diagram of a room with the bed represented by a rectangular square and be asked to add a table, a bookcase, a door, etc., in certain locations in the room. It is important to keep such activities simple so that the drawing task itself does not demand too much of testees. The activity is more interesting if it can be done as part of a simple story rather than as a list of statements, though this may depend on the level of the testees. In addition, the students should have a chance to try out this type of activity before having to do it as part of a test.

Tasks Involving Talks and Lectures

For students who will be using English in schools where it is the medium of instruction, there will be situations where they need to listen to lectures or talks in English and take notes and/or answer questions on the lecture or talk. Therefore, listening tests can involve listening to formal or informal talks.

One way of using talks in listening tests is to have the testees listen to the talk and then fill in the blanks in a written summary of the talk. The words chosen fro blanks should be ones that the testees cannot figure out from the context of the summary, without listening to the talk, but they

should also be ones that are related to the main idea of the talk, so that filling in the blanks does not require remembering small details of the talk.

Another way doing this involves giving testees questions to answer as they listen to the talk. These questions can be short answer/completion, multiple choice, or true/false. The difficulty with using short answer or completion questions is that they require the testees to both read and write while they are listening, something that can be difficult even for native speakers. Multiple choice questions may require a lot of reading, something that may also be a problem. True/false questions may be the best type for this type of task, since they require relatively little reading compared to multiple choice questions and relatively little writing compared to short answer/completion questions. Also, true/false questions can also have a "no information available" option, meaning that the information required to answer the question is not included in the talk. This decreases the amount of guessing and reduces the element of chance.

Another type of task that can be used is a chart that the testees fill in while listening to the talk. Answers in some of the blanks in the chart may be filled in for the testees. Testees should be given the chart in advance of hearing the talk, and be given time to familiarize themselves with it and make sure they understand what is expected of them.

Finally, testees can be allowed to take notes while listening to the talk, and then use the notes to answer questions after the talk is over. Depending on the length and complexity of the talk, testees might be given a list of the major topics included in the talk in order to help them in taking notes.

Summary

There are a number of ways to test listening, but, particularly when testees' listening proficiency gets more advanced, testing listening becomes more complicated. It becomes more difficult to separate listening from other skills, and combining skills can put great demands on the testee. In addition, some ways of testing listening do not reflect real-world listening tasks. In choosing tasks for listening, the teacher should be aware of these problems.